

House Foreign Affairs Committee  
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing  
on  
Climate Change and Human Rights

July 28, 2022 – 2:30p.m.

Statement of Darío José Mejía Montalvo  
Chair  
United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

Excellencies  
Ladies and Gentlemen present

I feel very honored by your invitation to speak today before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission on the subject of human rights and climate change.

Before starting, I would like to take a few seconds to remind everyone that we, Indigenous Peoples, existed since before the conformation of states and the establishment of social regulations based on individualism and consumerism.

Colonial processes destroyed in large part Indigenous cultures and governance systems. Survivors were relegated to territories that were considered inhospitable, habitable only by animals and savages. Many of the territories that were not expropriated during colonial times have been conserved until today.

It has been our own knowledge, practiced in relationship with nature, which has allowed Indigenous Peoples in these territories to conserve at least 80% of the planet's biodiversity, while only occupying 25% of the Earth's surface.

The territories that were previously not appreciated by those who have caused the current crisis are now coveted.

Thus, I must point out, that for Indigenous Peoples, climate is the language that Mother Earth has had to teach the proper way to live in harmony and balance. With the weather she has taught when to cultivate, when to harvest, when and where to gather, when to bundle up and when to use protection from the heat.

Currently, approximately 476 million persons belong to the 5,000 distinct Indigenous Peoples, approximately 6.2% of the global population, present in more than 90 countries, speaking 4,000 of the remaining 6,700 languages in the world.

In relation to human rights and climate, a first aspect to highlight is the threats and impacts.

Due to our direct dependence on, and close relationship with, our lands, territories and resources, we are among the first to suffer the consequences of climate change, although we are the ones that contribute the least to greenhouse gas emissions.

For example, in the Arctic, rising temperatures, uncertain seasons, and unexpected winds have changed the availability of food species for fishing and hunting.

For the Saami reindeer herders, the increased unpredictability and frequency of extreme weather events are altering human-animal behavior.

The Indigenous Peoples of the islands are among the peoples most threatened by rising sea levels.

In the Amazon region, rising temperatures, more frequent extreme weather, and deforestation have threatened the availability and stability of local food sources.

In regions like where I come from, changes in the cycles of rainy and dry seasons make planting periods unpredictable and the variability of breezes and sea temperatures mean that food autonomy for those that depend on fishing is increasingly at risk; traditional seeds and production methods are in grave danger.

In the mountain territories, the melting of ice makes the space for coexistence with the animals increasingly smaller and accelerates the scarcity of water for the dependent populations.

In arid regions, the accelerated loss of pollinators puts the food security of entire populations at risk.

These impacts exacerbate the inequalities Indigenous Peoples already face: political and economic marginalization; loss of land and resources; unemployment; discrimination.

These impacts force our people to migrate from their territories, within or outside their countries of origin, in search of food and economic opportunities. In Latin America alone, close to 50% of Indigenous People now live in urban areas. In this condition, we often face double discrimination: as migrants and as Indigenous Peoples. We become more vulnerable to human trafficking and smuggling as well as forced labor. For Indigenous women, this scenario is even worse. This is how a changing climate is impacting our human rights.

The second issue are the violations of the rights of Indigenous Peoples that are being carried out by the industries that are most responsible for climate change. The same forces that are driving global climate change threaten the lands, lives and livelihoods of Indigenous Peoples: legal and illegal logging; the oil, gas and mining industries; industrial agriculture; large infrastructure projects, etc.. And when our leaders, or our young people, denounce these threats - or organize to protect our rights - they are threatened, branded as terrorists, imprisoned, beaten... even killed.

In 2021, in Colombia, where I come from, there were 138 verified murders of human rights defenders. Almost all of them were people who opposed extractive industries. Most were Indigenous. Worldwide there were at least 358 human rights defenders killed. We do not know how many have been imprisoned. This ongoing human rights crisis must be addressed urgently.

The third issue that I think is important to discuss are the impacts of adaptation and mitigation strategies on the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

As the world transitions to a green economy, we see our lands being taken over by large solar, wind, hydro, and geothermal power projects. These interventions based on projects and without prior discussion with the Indigenous Peoples increase the epistemological, economic, and political injustices that have already generated the current energy matrix. The extraction of strategic minerals is being carried out in Indigenous territories without our consent. Our food security and livelihoods are threatened in areas that are used to plant monocultures for biofuels, and in areas that are used as carbon sinks, so that carbon credits can be traded on carbon markets and make people rich who have never set foot in our territories and know nothing about us. Carbon markets that allow multinational corporations to continue to put billions of tons of carbon into the air, while at the same time claiming to be "carbon neutral."

The monetization of the carbon market is a mask to cover up responsibilities, and is a new form of enclave economy and extractivism against those of us who have conserved the planet's biodiversity and vital resources.

The full and effective participation of Indigenous Peoples in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of mitigation and adaptation measures is crucial not only to increase their effectiveness, but also to ensure that they do not become another threat to our survival as distinct cultures.

I will end by saying that we, Indigenous Peoples, are your best allies in the fight to respond to the crisis of global climate change. This is not simply my hope or opinion, this is reality. We, the Indigenous Peoples of the world, have developed, over millennia, land and resource management practices that play a vital role in maintaining the ecological and climatic stability of the planet. Our lands are better protected than national parks and other protected areas; our forests are healthier; our territories are more effective in sequestering carbon.

The latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change acknowledges this, saying that supporting self-determination of Indigenous Peoples and working with us to incorporate traditional ecological knowledge and land management practices can help address or even mitigate the crisis.

Although we are agents of change in facing this crisis, and our ways of life, our knowledge, and our territorial management systems have a key role in mitigating and adapting to the impacts of climate change, during the last decade less than 1 % of international climate finance has gone to communities of Indigenous Peoples to manage forests that absorb carbon emissions that warm the planet.

We welcome the \$1.7 billion pledge for Indigenous Peoples to protect forests made by five governments, including the United States, and private funders at COP 26 in Glasgow.

However, this commitment is not enough, and we are concerned that it does not adequately address the effects of climate change, and that the majority of the funding will not reach Indigenous organizations directly.

In the framework of contributions for climate change, it is important that donors increase funds and include Indigenous Peoples of the seven socio-cultural regions as beneficiaries.

It is also crucial that they redefine the scope of their commitment so that funding does not refer only to forests and land tenure, but also to strengthening Indigenous Peoples' self-determination, local economies and governance systems.

The US government initiative known as “Plan to Conserve Global Forests: Critical Carbon Sinks” must take seriously the presence of Indigenous Peoples as owners of said territories and forests and engage Indigenous organizations to ensure that the plan has a holistic perspective and addresses historical justice.

I also recommend that the US government:

1. Take steps to ensure that Indigenous Peoples in the United States are engaged as partners in national efforts to adapt to and mitigate the impacts of global climate change.
2. That US foreign assistance programs engage Indigenous Peoples through our own social, political, and legal institutions; adhere to the standard of Free, Prior and Informed Consent, and; be used in a way that recognizes and respects the right of Indigenous Peoples to self-determination and our collective rights to our lands, territories and resources.
3. Promote greater visibility, justice and recognition of the contributions of Indigenous Peoples in the face of the challenges of climate change. Science must be aware that it needs the knowledge and practices of Indigenous Peoples and therefore needs dialogue with us as equals.